

Excerpts from David Whyte's *Crossing the Unknown Sea: Work as a Pilgrimage of Identity*

(David Whyte has introduced poetry into such companies as American Express, Boeing, and Toyota as a tool for understanding individual and organizational creativity.)

Amnesia of the imaginative kind always seems to stem from a form of arrogance. My arrogance took the form of busyness. I was incredibly busy. I had lots of responsibility, lots of meetings, courses to run, people to accommodate, budgets to meet. My blue-water, carefree life in the Galapagos Islands was but a distance memory. I had learned to work very fast, barely stopping for anything that did not seem productive or an aid to production. I moved from photocopier, to receptionist, to filing cabinet in a tight, self-enclosed orbit. Speed was my essence and, I thought, my true savior in solving the difficulties of commitment and the increasing burden of detail.

Speed in work has compensations. Speed gets noticed. Speed is praised by others. Speed is self-important. Speed absolves us. Speed means we don't really belong to any particular thing or person we are visiting and thus appears to elevate us above the ground of our labors. When it becomes all-consuming, speed is the ultimate defense, the antidote to stopping and really looking. If we really saw what we were doing and who we had become, we feel we might not survive the stopping and the accompanying self-appraisal. So we don't stop, and the faster we go the harder it becomes to stop. We keep moving on whenever any form of true commitment seems to surface. Speed is also warning, a throbbing, insistent indicator that some cliff edge or other is very near, a sure diagnostic sign that we are living someone else's life and doing someone else's work. But speed saves us the pain of all that stopping; speed can be such a balm, a saving grace, a way we tell ourselves in unconscious ways, that we are really not participating.

The great tragedy of speed as an answer to the complexities and responsibilities of existence is that very soon, we cannot recognize anything or anyone who is not traveling at the same velocity as we are. We see only those moving in the same whirling orbit and only those moving with the same urgency. Soon we begin to suffer a form of amnesia, caused by the blurred vision of velocity itself, where those things germane to our humanity are dropped from our minds one by one. We start to lose sight of any colleagues who are moving at a slower pace, and we start to lose sight of the bigger, slower cycles that underlie our work. We especially lose sight of the big, unfolding wave form passing through our lives that is indicative of our central character. On the personal side, as slaves to speed, we start to lose sight of family members, especially children, or those who are ill or infirm, who are not flying through the world as quickly and determinedly as we are. Just as seriously, we begin to leave behind the parts of our own selves that limp a little, the vulnerabilities that actually give us color and character. We forget that our sanity is dependent on a relationship with longer, more patient cycles extending beyond the urgencies and madness of the office. A friend falls sick, and in that busyness we find their interruption of our frantic lives frustrating and distracting. On the surface we extend our sympathies, but underneath we are already moving in a direction that takes us far away. We flee the situation even if we are sending flowers every day; we rejoin, thankfully, the world that is on the go, on the move, untouched by mortality. Once we ourselves are touched by that mortality, however, through whatever agency it arrives in our lives—a broken limb, the loss of a loved one, the collapse of our business, a moment of humiliation in the doorway of a meeting room—our identities built on speed almost immediately fall apart and disintegrate. We find ourselves suddenly alone and friendless, strangers even to ourselves (pages 117-119).

I felt as if I didn't have an ounce of energy left to do the work I had been doing. As I came in the kitchen door, I saw the bottle of red wine I had pulled out that morning sitting on the table in front of the window. Behind it, the sea formed a glinting gray-green background. The dark bottle stood there in preparation for a guest I would be seeing that night. I dropped into a chair and looked at the unopened bottle and the sea and the sky for a very long time. I could feel how utterly exhausted I was in body and spirit, and how much I needed to talk with someone, anyone, but also how marvelous it was that the person arriving to share that bottle had exactly the kind of perspectives I needed at that moment.

I could see Brother David already in my mind's eye, sitting across from me with the glass of wine in front of him on the coffee table. A book of Rilke's poetry balanced on his knees. He was reciting Rilke in his rich, Austrian inflection, the sounds emanating not only from deep within his body but also from far inside some powerful understanding mediated by long years of silence and prayer. Brother David was my kind of monk; no stranger to silence but equally at home in the robust world of work, its words, and its meanings. He also loved poetry with a passion similar to my own, and exhibited a far-reaching intellect and a far-reaching imagination in its exploration. You might be impressed by his extraordinary capacity for compassion, but it did not mean he would let an unthinking assertion pass him by without a challenge or a clarification.

A few hours later, Brother David was indeed sitting in that empty chair. The bottle framed by darkness now in the window, and the cork sitting next to it. He was turning the pages of the Rilke book with one hand and sipping from his glass with the other. I had a second copy of the book but it sat on my lap unopened. After the first sip of cabernet, I felt as if I was in a deep well of fatigue looking up toward a tiny ellipse of light flickering at the surface. I felt as if the tiny light might disappear altogether and the water flow over me if I didn't say something soon. I looked at Brother David, whose eyes had just lit up with discovery of a poem to begin our evening, and heard him begin to read.... I found the poem in my own book and read, on the opposing page, Robert Bly's marvelous translation:

*This clumsy living that moves lumbering
as if in ropes through what is not done,
reminds us of the awkward way that a swan walks.*

*And to die, which is the letting go
of the ground we stand on and cling to every day,
is like the swan, when he nervously lets himself down
into the water, which receives him gaily
and which flows joyfully under
and after him, wave after wave,
while the swan, unmoving and marvelously calm,
is pleased to be carried, each moment more fully grown,
more like a king, further and further on.*

I read the lines, seeing the image of the swan being borne on the waters so effortlessly, and thought of my own days so full of will and effort. I looked up at Brother David, the nearest thing I had to a truly wise person in my life, and found myself almost blurting, "Brother David?" I uttered it in such an old, petitionary, Catholic way that I almost thought he was going to say,

“Yes, my son?” But he did not; he turned his face toward me, following the spontaneous note of desperate sincerity, and simply waited.

“Tell me about exhaustion,” I said. He looked at me with an acute, searching, compassionate ferocity for the briefest of moments, as if trying to sum up the entirety of the situation, and without missing a beat, as if he had been waiting all along, to say a life-changing thing to me. He said in the form both of a question and assertion: “You know that the antidote to exhaustion is not necessarily rest?”

“The antidote to exhaustion is not necessarily rest,” I repeated woodenly, as if I might exhaust myself completely before I reached the end of the sentence. “What is it, then?”

“The antidote to exhaustion is *wholeheartedness*.” He looked at me for a *wholehearted* moment, as if I should fill in the blanks. But I was a blank to be filled at that moment, and though I knew something pivotal had been said, I had not the wherewithal to say anything in reply. So he carried on: “You are so tired through and through because a good half of what you do here in this organization has nothing to do with your true powers, or the place you have reached in your life. You are only half here, and half here will kill you after a while. You need something to which you can give your fully powers. You know what that is; I don’t have to tell you.”

He didn’t have to tell me. Brother David knew I wanted my work to be my poetry. “Go on,” I said.

“You are like Rilke’s Swan in his awkward waddling across the ground; the swan doesn’t cure his awkwardness by beating himself on the back, by moving faster, or by trying to organize himself better. He does it by moving toward the elemental water, where he belongs. It is the simple contact with the water that gives him grace and presence. You only have to touch the elemental waters in your own life, and it will transform everything. But you have to let yourself down into those waters from the ground on which you stand, and that can be hard. Particularly if you think you might drown.” He looked down and read again.

*And to die, which is the letting go
of the ground we stand on and cling to every day...*

He looked up again, warming to the theme. I was getting a good talking-to. “This nervously letting yourself down....takes courage and the word *courage* in English comes from the old French word *cuere*, heart. You must do something heartfelt, and you must do it soon. Let go of all this effort, and let yourself down, however awkwardly, into the waters of the work you want for yourself. It’s all right, you know, to support yourself with something secondary until your work has ripened, but once it has ripened to a transparent fullness, it has to be gathered in. You have ripened already, and you are waiting to be brought in. Your exhaustion is a form of inner fermentation. You are beginning, ever so slowly”—he hesitated—“to rot on the vine.”

I gave an involuntary shiver at that last image, and recoiled from the prospect. It was a prospect of an early death experienced while still alive and it jolted me out of my exhausted torpor, as if some imaginative adrenaline was now beginning to flow through my system. I looked back at him, and realized that simply in the act of coming awake for a moment, my tiredness was falling away. His words had helped to lower me deeper into myself, down into some imaginative

buoyancy, had plucked me off the vine; whatever the metaphor of harvest of arrival, it was happening right there in the room. From outside the window, you would have seen a younger man and an older man speaking intently over two glasses of wine, their books put aside. You would see the younger one lean forward, purse his lips, say something, laugh, and sit back again. You would have seen a moment of light intimacy; you would not have known anything had changed profoundly for the younger man in that instant. But everything had changed.

I said, "That's it, that's it exactly." I sat back. What came to my mind even as he was speaking, were the faces of all my colleagues in the organization, with whom I would have to have those difficult, courageous conversations in order to change my work; change my work more toward teaching, more toward speaking, more toward poetry. It was a daunting prospect, but I wouldn't be put off the task. I was so shaken by.....the strong, pivotal words of Brother David that I took those conversations as a felt challenge and discipline from that moment on. I realized I had nowhere else to go. I gathered my courage the very next morning and began to talk with my colleagues.

Over the next few months, I took the time to make those imaginary conversations real. I spoke with person after person, and slowly, conversation by conversation, changed my job description in the organization to something more fitting to my temperament. But the success itself told me the game was up for half measures. "Halfway will kill you," I remembered, as my work life slowly began to simplify and come back into focus. As I met with each of my colleagues, I began to see that in an extraordinary way, the conversations themselves were doing all the work. It forced me to ask myself the next question: "If this kind of conversation will bring you the work you want for yourself within an organization, what kind of work do you really want to do in the wider world? What are your elemental waters? What courageous conversations will bring you to your poetry?" Each of us has an equivalent core in our work, whether it is the path of the artist or the explorations of the engineer. Even if we already possess the work of our dreams, there is a way of doing that work that will deepen and enliven it, a way that begs for a daily disciplined conversation (pages 129-135).

Questions to consider:

1. David Whyte talks about his arrogance taking the form of *busyness*. How have you been caught up in the *busyness* of life, or how do you keep yourself from being caught up in the *busyness* of life? In the midst of *busyness*, have you experienced the loss of sight to which Whyte refers? What was that like?
2. "The antidote to exhaustion is not necessarily rest; the antidote to exhaustion is wholeheartedness." Do you agree? Why or why not?
3. "Half here will kill you after a while." Have you experienced this?
4. What are the *elemental waters* in your life? Have you been able to let yourself down into those waters? If so, how?
5. What *courageous conversations* do you need to have?